Transcription of July 12 and july 19, 1951 Fairbury Blade newspaper on Big 1951 Fairbury IL Flood

By: **Dale C. Maley**
Date: **August 18, 2026**
Data Source: **Paper copies of the Blade in 1951 bound book at Fairbury Echoes Museum**

July 12, 1951, Blade

History's Greatest Rainfall Here Causes Worst Flood In 82 Years

Record 7.3 Inches of Rain Falls in Six Hours;
Crop Damage for Area Estimated Near 2 Million; Water at Highest Level Since 1869.

The severe wind and rain storm which lashed Fairbury and the general vicinity for miles around Sunday night was described by long-term local residents as the worst of its kind that they could remember. The ensuing floods were said to be the highest here since 1869.

Crop damage for the entire general area was being estimated at 2 million dollars, not to speak of property damage.

Sheets of rain fell in cloudburst proportions and winds reached hurricane-like force during the major part of the storm which lasted some four hours — roughly between 8 p.m. and midnight. The government rain gauge at the waterworks at the south edge of town recorded a deluge of 7.3 inches of rainfall between 8 p.m. and 2 a.m. A privately operated gauge on the north side recorded a deluge of 8.1 inches during the same period, according to Myron Womack's measurements.

Federal conservation men said that according to government records for this area 4 inches of rain in 4 hours will be the maximum rainfall to be expected here in a 50-year period and that once in 100 years 4½ inches would be the maximum rainfall to fall in 4 hours. It appears that nature has no respect for estimates, since the rainfall exceeded anything that government conservationists expected to happen in any 100 year period.

Resembles Jungle

Wind velocity was not recorded here, but rain was driven at the height of the storm at about a 10-degree angle with the ground. Trees and large branches of trees were blown down throughout the city in great quantity, the walks and streets of the town resembling a jungle to residents as they awoke on Monday morning. No street in the entire city escaped the falling branches. Many of the streets were blocked. While driving through the streets it seemed that one was going through a path in a forest.

The high winds also knocked down three large billboards just east of town, blew over a light pole at the softball diamond, blew out window panes from some farm buildings and at least at one store building, tore away a part of the roof on the new high school gymnasium, and toppled chimneys on at least four buildings. To top it off, the gale started in motion two empty freight cars standing on a siding at the

Honegger mill, blowing them a distance of some 400 feet and with such force that when the first car struck other cars on a joining track, it was derailed. Severest damage was done in the northeast section of town, where larger trees were actually uprooted in several cases.

Highest in 82 Years

The Blade could find no one who could remember when water reached an overall higher level since 1869. However, David Munz said that in 1927 11 inches of water flowed over the west end of the cement bridge east of town. Straight north from town, roads were impassable to automobiles at a distance of two miles from the Vermilion river. Not all of the intervening land was under water, but within a half-mile of the river, practically all fields were inundated, the tops of two to three foot high corn stalks barely showing above the water in some fields, and completely covered in others.

Northeast of the city water was reported level with the floor boards of the Fugate bridge. Jim Mowery, who has lived near the bridge for over 60 years, said the water was six inches higher than he had ever seen it before. The river at this point was a mile and a quarter wide.

The water in that section also reached to within four inches of the floor in the new farm home of the Roy Goulds'. Pigs were chased into the front yard in order to save them from drowning. At dawn Monday morning Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dart were rescued from their farm home which had become completely surrounded by water. Royce and Harry Carter and Kenny Brandt drove a motor boat through a corn field to carry out the rescue. They crossed fences without having to lift the motor.

Wing's oldest resident reported a water level on Route 47 just west of that village, higher than he, or his father, had ever witnessed.

The golf course, for years a measure for water levels, was completely covered with the exception of the club house and Nos. one, two and six greens. The water approached the club house to within a distance of 20 or 30 feet.

Water was left standing in a dozen different streets, in several cases reaching into yards to lap at the steps of homes. Water still reached to the top of the curbstone at Second and Oak streets late Monday evening, 24 hours after the first rain. Hick-

History's Greatest

(Continued from Page 1)

ory and Walnut streets also had water standing for many hours. Water also went over the First street extension leading north from town, reaching the porches of a number of homes along the road.

Not A Dry Basement

There was not a dry basement in town, or if there was, The Blade did not hear of it. The comment was passed at least on four occasions that "this is the first time we've had water in our basement." Depths varied from a few inches to five feet in basements Monday morning, many retaining as much as three feet as late as Monday night. Plumbers said Tuesday that it would take two more days to pump out all the basements.

Honeggers' & Co. estimated a huge loss in damaged motors when the basement of their mill filled to within a foot and a half of the ground floor. The basement was said to have filled quickly after a portion of the T., P. & W. track ballast, acting as a dike, was washed from under the tracks, releasing a large amount of water built up on the other side.

Roads Blocked

Outside of Fairbury, the situation was as bad, if not in some cases, worse. Route 24 between Fairbury and Forrest was closed to auto traffic from about ten o'clock Sunday night to 11 o'clock Monday morning. Water flowed over the pavement in a stream just east of the bridge a quarter-mile east of town. Water was over the pavement at the bridge just east of the curve between the two towns, at a depth at one time of between 2 and 3 feet.

The bridge at Forrest was completely under water, abutments and all. One section of the bridge was completely washed away, and two others partly taken by the rushing current. The water at this point reached a depth of at least eight feet above the stream's normal surface.

Trailer Camp Flooded

Directly adjacent to the stream was the trailer camp set up for the trailer homes of the men working on the pipeline.

Most of the workers and their families apparently were asleep during the first part of the storm, or thought little about the possibilities of it reaching cloudburst proportions. Here is the story one lady told about the discovery of the rising water:

"It was about 10:30 and I had told my husband to get up and open some windows in the rear of our trailer. When he opened the door he stepped out into water about two feet deep. The first thing he did was to see about our toy terrier puppy that we had tied to a leash under the trailer. He was drowned.

"I then told my husband that he had better get the car out, at least, and this he did. I tried to get things gathered up in the trailer to take out with me, but when my husband came back to us, I settled for taking only the money that we kept in the trailer. We splashed through hip-high water to higher ground. My husband had come away without his shoes, and I had to borrow a jacket." End of quote.

The water continued to rise, and at its highest point, reached early Monday morning, the water level came to within 1½ feet of the tops of the trailers. Of about 15 trailers parked in the area, five were pulled to safely. Others were removed on Tuesday morning.

Train Wrecked

On the other side of Fairbury, west on Route 24, water covered the road in five places, all to recede about daybreak Monday. Many Fairburians were stranded in Chenoa and Pontiac, the blacktop from Weston also being impassible. Route 66 was also closed between Pontiac and Chenoa until Monday afternoon. Traffic was re-routed down Route 47, causing a steady stream of traffic into Forrest from the north.

Farther east, between Piper City and Chatsworth, flood waters weakened a railroad bridge, causing the derailment of seven freight cars of a T., P. & W. train.

Storm Approaches

The storm followed a hot, humid day, with temperatures in the high 80's and the high humidity causing it to feel more as if it were in the high 90's.

The first clouds appeared in the west, a plain mass of dark blue. Soon other dark, low-hanging clouds formed in the northwest, and the atmosphere took on a rather peculiar color, greenish in tint. At about 7:45 it was black as night outside, a time when an hour of good daylight usually remains.

At 7:50, according to the government rain gauge, it began to rain. The rain was accompanied by much lightning and thunder, but no heavy winds. By 9 o'clock it had rained exactly one inch. Between 9 and 10 it poured down 2.4 inches. It was a little after 9:30 that the first heavy wind began, and at 9:45 the electrical power went off. The wind and rain subsided about 10 o'clock, but started again abruptly at 10:20. In the next 40 minutes it rained an additional 1.8 inches, and the wind reached its greatest velocity.

From 11 p. m. to shortly after 2 a. m. the rain continued, without the heavy wind, depositing an additional 2.1 inches of water.

It was during the worst part of the storm, between 10:30 and 11, that an airplane circled very low over Fairbury, the pilot no doubt attempting to get his bearings from a landmark such as the highway. "Chub" Mehrkens heard the plane, telephoned Chanute Field and asked them to try to get in touch with the plane. The Air Base did and the plane landed there safely.

The storm extended into Indiana, where it took the form of a tornado at Kokomo.

Crop Damage Heavy.

It is thought the crop damage in Livingston county will run between two million and two and a half million dollars.

In the area hit worst by the storm the soybean crops will be an almost complete loss. Along the river bottom lands the loss is complete. Some corn may survive.

If the county's crops remain under water for three days, all corn will be lost, Paul Wilson, county farm adviser, said.

"Top soil being washed from the high ground into the Illinois river will cause land values to depreciate. Phosphate, limestone and potash alone washed off the ground would assume startling damage figures," W. D. Spence, county chairman of the Production and Marketing Administration, reported.

The Flood of 1869

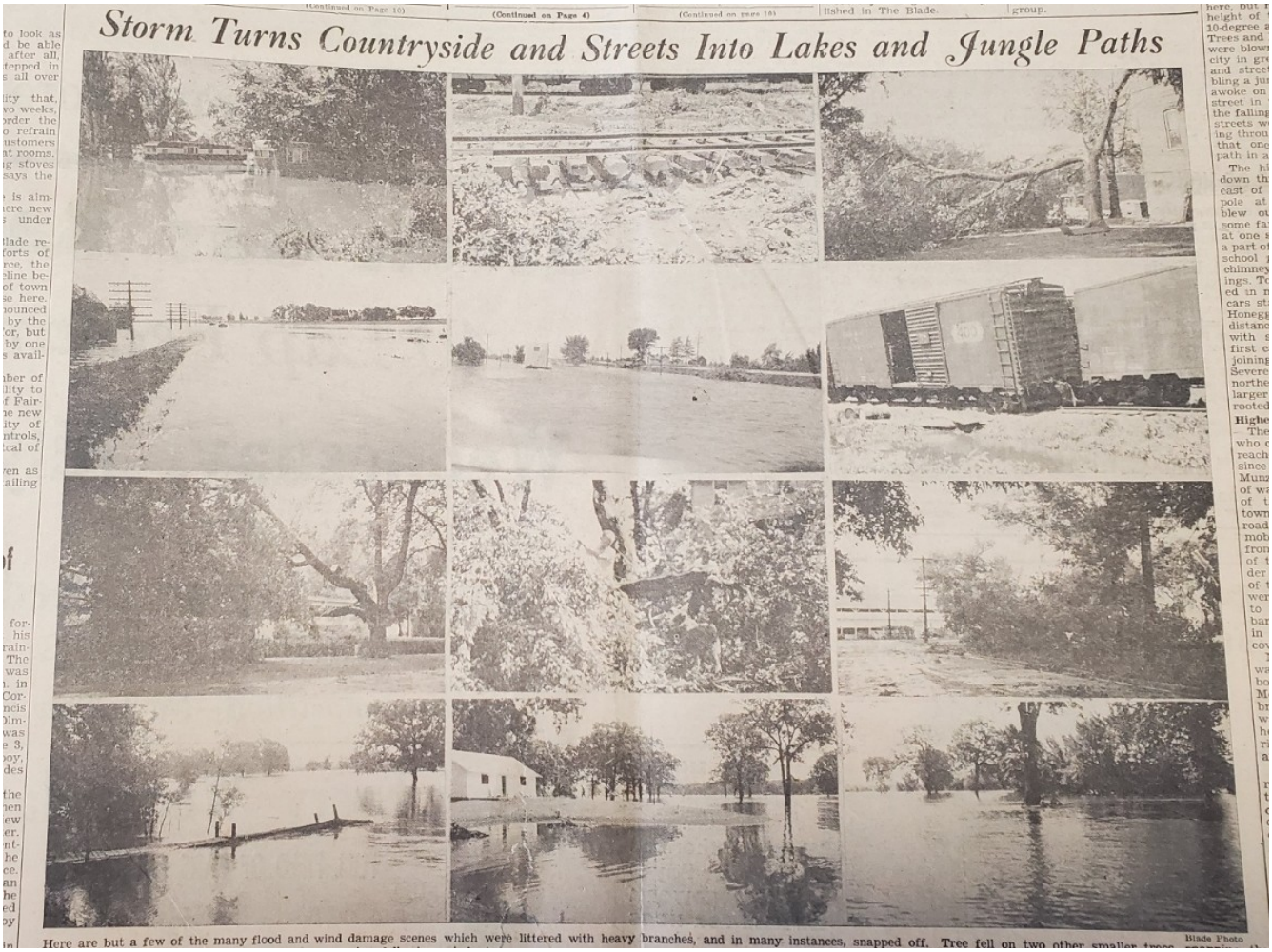
Many papers in this area have compared the flood with that of 1869, the greatest flood in recorded history, and this one is the greatest since that time.

There probably is no living person who can recall the flood of 1869, but the late A. G. Phelps, born in 1852 on a farm south of town, recalled it clearly and often told his children about it. It was a rainy year, with water courses already swollen, and on the 9th of June a nine-inch rain fell for hours in cloudburst volume, raising the creek, which borders the farm on the north, six feet, filling lowlands for miles, with

fearful damage to crops, livestock and property. “Everything that would float, from the head of the creek was lodged in Spence’s timber,” said Mr. Phelps; and the boys of that period had a great time the following few days climbing around the debris of wagons, buggies and farm property of all kinds caught in the timber.

Years later when Mr. Phelps used to take his children out to the farm in the buggy, he sometimes stopped at the entrance, pointed to a notch cut in the gate post, and said, “Boys, there is the high water mark of 1869.”

12 Photos that Accompany this article


Storm Turns Countryside and Streets Into Lakes and Jungle Paths

Here are but a few of the many flood and wind damage scenes which were littered with heavy branches, and in many instances, snapped off. Tree fell on two other smaller trees

Blade Photo

NOTE: Above collage photo taken with digital camera from the paper newspaper. The long caption will be shown below.

ChatGPT was used to enhance the photo, which is shown below:

Storm Turns Countryside and Streets Into Lakes and Jungle Paths

The relatively long caption below the photo collage of 12 photos is transcribed and shown below:

Here are but a few of the many flood and wind damage scenes that prevailed in Fairbury and vicinity Monday morning following the hectic storm of Sunday night. Readers must keep in mind that none of the pictures shows the water at its highest level, as that was reached sometime before daybreak Monday morning. All of the pictures were taken between 8 and 11 a. m. Monday. The photos show as follows:

Top row, left: A section of the trailer camp at Forrest. Situated not 75 yards from the normal channel of the Forrest creek, this area was one of the hardest hit by rising waters. Water at one time completely covered the small windows visible in the trailers, doing untold damage to the approximately 15 trailers parked in the camp. Just to the right is the bridge on Route 24, which had water over its railings—about as high as the camera was held in taking the picture.

Center: A part of the washed-out switch track at the Honegger mill west of Fairbury. Ballast on a section of the main line was also washed away. This, and other washouts farther east, caused a

cancellation of all T., P. & W. trains that was still in effect as The Blade went to press yesterday afternoon.

Right: More than half of this tree, growing in Central park, just behind the city hall, was blown down. Pictures on this page do not begin to show the overall appearance of city streets, all of which were littered with heavy branches, and in many instances, snapped off whole trees.

Second row, left: This is a view eastward on Route 24, taken from a point about 50 feet beyond the bridge just east of town. Water was flowing rapidly over the highway for a distance of some 1,000 feet as the picture was snapped, at a deepest point of about three inches. Only on a few occasions in many years has water gone over the road at this point, and remained there as long. Picture was taken over 24 hours after first rain came.

Center: This shot, taken from inside an automobile, is looking west from a point just beyond the bridge east of the curve between Fairbury and Forrest. It was snapped about a half-hour after the first cars were allowed to pass through. Water was still about 10 to 12 inches deep.

Right: This derailed box car, with another coupled behind, was blown down its siding by the Honegger mill with such force as to cause it to leave the rails when it struck another string of cars on an adjoining siding. Force of wind can be calculated somewhat by thinking of the force needed to put two box cars in motion.

Third row: These pictures show other parts of the widespread wind damage. Photo at left shows large limb of elm tree in front of C. J. Claudon home on Fourth and Elm streets which was snapped off. Tree fell on two other smaller trees, snapping the top from one. At right is scene on South Second street at the fair grounds, showing large limb which fell over sidewalk and smashed fence. In the center is portion of two trees which fell in front of the Frank Pratt home on North Fifth, damaging the top of his auto. Man with hatchet is the Rev. William Pritchard, who is being assisted by “Sonny” Pratt. Frank was also helping with the clearing operations, but is camouflaged somewhere in the picture by the tree.

Bottom row: Three views of the Indian Creek golf course, in which the creek predominates. This, without question, shows water at the highest level it has ever been since the course was constructed some 30 years ago. Residents stated, in fact, that flood was worst since 1869. Picture at left was taken from a position near No. 1 green looking over the course to the southeast. Center shot shows relationship of water to clubhouse, looking northeast, and picture at right looks out from the clubhouse to No. 5 green, directly south. Note the rowboat. Crest at the course probably was not more than an inch higher than shown here.

The Blade is indebted to the Fultz Studio, which remained open until 11 o’clock Monday night to process these Blade films in order that they would appear in this issue.

Flood Sidelights

Among the many stories arising from Sunday night's deluge and the resulting floods are the following:

More than 550 phones were out of order in Fairbury, caused by falling branches, wind and water damage. It will be a month before service in Fairbury returns to normal, according to Arnold Rigsby, repair man. There are eight lines to Forrest, but after the storm only one line was in operation, and long distance calls were limited to emergencies. Rural lines were badly damaged.

John Ziegenhorn, W. E. Butcher, Art Walters, and Ed Hohulin worked all day Monday removing the larger limbs from the street in order to permit two-way traffic.

Pigs are more intelligent than people suppose. James Goold's pigs, tired of swimming, rested their noses on a fence wire.

Albert Tavener caught a 19-pound carp while doing chores at the home of his father, Raymond Tavener.

Harry Kloffenstein said that he sold at least three radiators to motorists who had driven through deep water. Their fans had bent and slashed the radiator.

Most business houses had several feet of water in their basements. Water pumps, in many cases, worked all night Monday removing the water.

After the roofing blew off the new gym, over two inches of water covered the northwest section of the floor, according to Dewey DeMoss, who worked 4 hours Monday morning removing the water from the hard-wood floor, which began buckling. The damage will require the laying of a new floor in much of the gym, and run into thousands of dollars. The loss is covered by insurance.

The high school basement had water in it until Tuesday. The boiler room and fan room were flooded. Under water were the new stoker motors.

Many basements had water flowing out of the basement windows.

The insurance agents report that wind damage caused several chimneys to fall, and that other minor damages were common. Many persons remarked that Fairbury was fortunate because no homes were seriously damaged.

Some farmers lost practically their entire crop, and much livestock.

The city street crew, consisting of Charlie Runyon, Otis Hurt, and Kenneth Runyon has put in many hours picking up brush, opening streets and unplugging drains. They are trying to get around to everyone as soon as possible.

Ned Wagner caught two 15-pound carp Wednesday morning, while they were swimming near a mail box north of Fairbury.

The city's electrical and plumbing shops are busy drying out, replacing, and repairing mechanisms on such appliances as oil and stoker furnaces, washing machines, hot water heaters, and other motors, which were in the flooded basements.

Deepfreezers were bobbing around many basements. In one case, oil tanks in a basement were torn loose by the waters.

Clarence Wessels was among those losing livestock. He lost 3 heifers and 7 head of pigs.

One man driving through the rain on west Fairbury, saw the giant plane which was in this vicinity, bearing toward him with its lights on looking like a ball of fire.

He is said to have exclaimed seriously, “This is it! This is the end of the world.”

Continued on Page 10

Flood Sidelights — Continued from Page 1

Mr. and Mrs. Nate Steidinger, returning from Charlotte, Mich., where they had met Mrs. Steidinger’s sister, Mrs. Carson, got into the storm at Huntington, Indiana and drove through water (which ran into their car on both sides) the remainder of the way home except for the detour at Chatsworth. There the wind was bad but there was no water across the roads.

They left Huntington at 9:30, reached Forrest at 3:15 and did not get to Fairbury until 6:00 a.m. They drove some 30 miles to get to Forrest to Fairbury.

The Fairbury Coal Chute, owned by Henry DeFries, was completely surrounded by water and up until yesterday Mr. DeFries had not been able to get into the office or do any work around the yards.

The porch at the Wesley Woodward home was damaged when water washed out one of the porch supports, allowing it to drop.

Some rooms at the Miss Eva Hornbeck home were in quite a mess following the storm. A walnut tree was blown down and hit the back porch and kitchen. This caused a stovepipe to fall down and soot scattered everywhere.

The Gene Zimmerman home was damaged somewhat when a tree was blown down and fell against the house.

Trees were blown down all over town and large limbs were torn from other trees. While several houses were hit by these falling trees there were may near misses.

WATER 10 INCHES DEEP IN SKROBONAK HOME

Mr. and Mrs. Adam Skrobonak and daughter Mildred, and son Ernest, were forced to leave their home Monday evening due to the high flood conditions. The water rose 10 inches inside their house. All the livestock had to be moved to higher land. Some poultry was lost in the flood waters. The poultry saved had to be moved to the second story of the tool shed.

The neighbors that helped were Fred and Floyd Immke, William and Lee Athey, Bob Fawver and the Skrobonaks’ daughter, Mrs. Everett Ruff.

THREE FIRE DEPT. CALLS

The Fairbury fire department made three calls as a result of the storm. During the storm they were summoned to the Mac Locker farm, northeast of town, where a barn had been struck by lightning. The fire was out of control when the trucks arrived and with water rising swiftly over the road, they returned to town. Later that night the trucks were called to the Tom Kuntz farm home where a tree had been set ablaze by a live wire. Monday noon the department was called to the Irwin Nagle home where a toaster, forgotten when the current went off, had started a small blaze in a cupboard when the electricity was turned on.

Flood waters began to recede in the immediate Fairbury area Monday afternoon, but an additional rainfall of 3 inches Tuesday afternoon left water standing in the streets and partially refilled basements.

Cornell Drowning Victim Grandson of Fairbury Woman

The 12-year-old son of a former Fairbury resident lost his life Monday morning in a rain-swollen creek near Cornell. The boy, Robert A. Olmstead, was drowned at about 11:45 a. m. in the Ida creek a mile south of Cornell. He was the son of Francis and Alice Olmstead. Mr. Olmstead, a native of Fairbury, was killed in a truck accident June 3, 1950. The grandmother of the boy, Mrs. Elizabeth Olmstead, resides here.

Robert was playing in the creek with three other boys when he suddenly sank from view about 50 feet out in the water. Witnesses said he had apparently stepped off a ledge, but he did not reappear at the surface. His body was recovered about an hour later, at the spot where he had gone down. Rescuers tried for an hour to revive the boy with artificial respiration.

Funeral services were held in Cornell Tuesday. Services are to be held in Chicago at 2 p. m. Friday. Burial will be made in the Palos Hills Memorial Gardens.

Robert Olmstead was born December 14, 1938, in Chicago. He moved to Cornell with his parents about two years ago. He would have entered the Seventh grade in the Cornell consolidated school next fall.

Besides his mother and grandmother, he is survived by a brother, Charles, of Chicago; a sister, Barbara Jean, at home; and the maternal grandmother, Mrs. E. C. Short, of Saginaw, Mich.

Drinking Water Not Harmed by Flood

There is absolutely no possibility that the city’s drinking water may become contaminated by the recent flood, Dr. H. C. Saur told the Blade Wednesday.

Contaminated water could enter the mains at one place, Saur said and that would be at the water works. As flood waters did not even approach the plant, the water is definitely safe.

The only danger of any stagnant pools left by the flood lies in the fact that they could be a breeding place for mosquitoes. If the pools do not drain away in about two days, Mayor Taylor said, they will be sprayed.

Even though there is no danger in disease spreading from the water, Dr. Saur urged children to refrain from wading and swimming in flooded areas, as germs could be picked up from the unclean water.

July 19, 1951 Blade Newspaper

Pontiac Hard Hit By Flood Waters

The Vermilion river at Pontiac Tuesday morning hit its highest crest since the memorable flood of 1869, the Tuesday morning crest being just two inches lower than the crest of 82 years ago.

Many homes were flooded and families in the southwest area and the east part of town had to be evacuated. A number of families moved out when it became necessary to shut off gas and electricity.

Warden Jerome J. Munie of the Pontiac prison, estimates that $100,000 damage had been done to prison property, exclusive of damage done to the new power house.

Shipping In Drinking Water at Streator

The swollen Vermilion river overran parts of Streator and inundated the water plant, making the water unfit for drinking. It is thought it will be a week yet before water service for households will be restored. In the meantime water was being shipped into Streator in railroad tank cars and distributed in milk trucks.

The Vermilion river at Streator was at the highest stage ever recorded, being five feet above flood level.

Things Were Floating At Knoll Lodge

Si Moser and Will Morris went out to Knoll Lodge about six miles north of Fairbury, Tuesday, taking with them Mr. Morris' boat powered with an outboard motor.

As might be taken from its name, Knoll Lodge is situated on a high knoll, and the Vermilion river runs within a few feet of it. The two men found the cabin in its usual position and possibly the knoll is still there, judging from the fact that the cabin must be resting on it.

However, they could not see the knoll.

Mr. Morris and Mr. Moser left their car on the road and got into the boat and followed the same route as the members usually take when going down the lane in cars to the club house. They could tell where they were by the tops of the telephone poles protruding from the water.

They didn't have to get out of the boat to inspect the interior of the cabin. They opened a door and floated in. Chairs and other loose articles were floating about.

inside the cabin. They started to look for some of the outside equipment and after motoring around for a time they located the table bench lodged in the top of a tree. They hitched the bench onto the motor boat, took it back to the cabin, opened the door and floated it in for safe keeping. A gas tank that had floated away was seen by Raymond Tavener, and towed to his house.

One thing that Mr. Morris and Mr. Moser noted was that the main current of the river was not following the river bed, but was taking a short cut across the fields. There was very little action of the water where the river bed is.

This is the second time in the 32-year history of Knoll Lodge that water ever came up into the building. Following the heavy rain of May 10, 1933, some water came into the west room of the building.

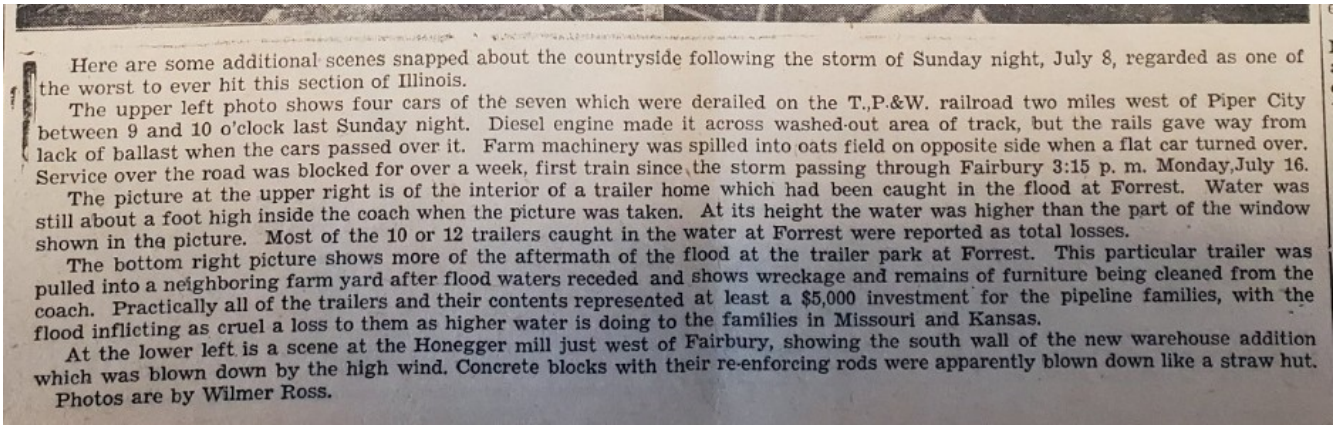
4 Photos from this Edition

possible to correct the trouble. Item to The Blade. nieces and nephews.

More Storm Damage Told In Pictures

4 Photos Improved by Chat GPT

Original Caption



Here are some additional scenes snapped about the countryside following the storm of Sunday night, July 8, regarded as one of the worst to ever hit this section of Illinois.

The upper left photo shows four cars of the seven which were derailed on the T.,P.&W. railroad two miles west of Piper City between 9 and 10 o'clock last Sunday night. Diesel engine made it across washed-out area of track, but the rails gave way from lack of ballast when the cars passed over it. Farm machinery was spilled into oats field on opposite side when a flat car turned over. Service over the road was blocked for over a week, first train since the storm passing through Fairbury 3:15 p. m. Monday, July 16.

The picture at the upper right is of the interior of a trailer home which had been caught in the flood at Forrest. Water was still about a foot high inside the coach when the picture was taken. At its height the water was higher than the part of the window shown in the picture. Most of the 10 or 12 trailers caught in the water at Forrest were reported as total losses.

The bottom right picture shows more of the aftermath of the flood at the trailer park at Forrest. This particular trailer was pulled into a neighboring farm yard after flood waters receded and shows wreckage and remains of furniture being cleaned from the coach. Practically all of the trailers and their contents represented at least a $5,000 investment for the pipeline families, with the flood inflicting as cruel a loss to them as higher water is doing to the families in Missouri and Kansas.

At the lower left is a scene at the Honegger mill just west of Fairbury, showing the south wall of the new warehouse addition which was blown down by the high wind. Concrete blocks with their re-enforcing rods were apparently blown down like a straw hut.

Photos are by Wilmer Ross.

Caption Transcribed by ChatGPT

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THE FAIRBURY BLADE, THURSDAY, JULY 19, 1951

More Water Damage

Photo by Wilmer Ross

Another scene of water damage. This picture was taken at the corner of Walnut and Clay streets, in the west part of town, and shows water above the basement windows of residence.

Final Notes:

I transcribed this article so I can use the information about a new story I am writing about the two worst floods in Fairbury's history, the 1869 and 1951 floods.

I tried to be as accurate as possible in transcribing this article, but no transcription is perfect. I photographed the Blade photos using a digital camera from the paper Blade bound copies at the Fairbury Echoes Museum

Dale C. Maley

Fairbury, IL Historian

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